

# Exchanging Words and Skills: Language Documentation in West Papua

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# 1. Ethical Fieldwork



# Ethical Fieldwork

From the LSA's Ethics Statement (2009):

- ▶ “linguists should... respect their [the speech community’s] rights and wishes”.
- ▶ These consultants and communities “have the right to control who will have access to the resulting data, with full knowledge of the potential consequences”.
- ▶ “Ideal frameworks for interaction with outside researchers vary depending on a community’s particular culture and history.”
- ▶ Of particular urgency in settings where “politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled” (Hale 1992).

Bottom line: Respect the community’s needs and wishes,  
*whatever they may determine them to be.*

## 2. A More Restrictive Paradigm



## Question 1: Extent of Data Access

- ▶ Case 1: the community decides that their best interest lies in restricting access to their language.
- ▶ “equates research with taking from the community” (Holton 2009)
  - ▶ Reasons may be political, cultural, historical, etc.
- ▶ Wilkins (1992) describes one such instance in his work on Mparntwe Arrernte in Alice Springs.

# A More Restrictive Paradigm

Wilkins (1992)

- ▶ The community chose which variety he would work on.
- ▶ They vet all articles before publication.
- ▶ Can decide that examples may not be used (ie in a discussion on swearing).
- ▶ Can decide who the linguist will work with/veto trips to other communities.
- ▶ Certain aspects of the language may be restricted to the researcher/the public at large.
- ▶ “As far as they were concerned, language and knowledge are not free to everyone, but are under Aboriginal control.”

# A More Restrictive Paradigm

Why would a community decide to limit research?

- ▶ Lack of accountability can lead to negative consequences for the community.
  - ▶ Inaccuracies, release of secret/sensitive material, etc.
- ▶ Bad experiences with previous researchers/journalists.
- ▶ Inability of the community to access or benefit from products of research.
- ▶ History of exploitation.
- ▶ More pressing needs (conflicts of funding, time, etc.)



## Question 2: Giving Back

“Academics take and take and take but what do they give back? Possibly a dictionary that will gather dust except for the very few that use them.” (Holton 2009).

- ▶ Concrete contributions (see ie Rice 2006).
- ▶ Abstract contributions.

### 3. Case Study: West Papua

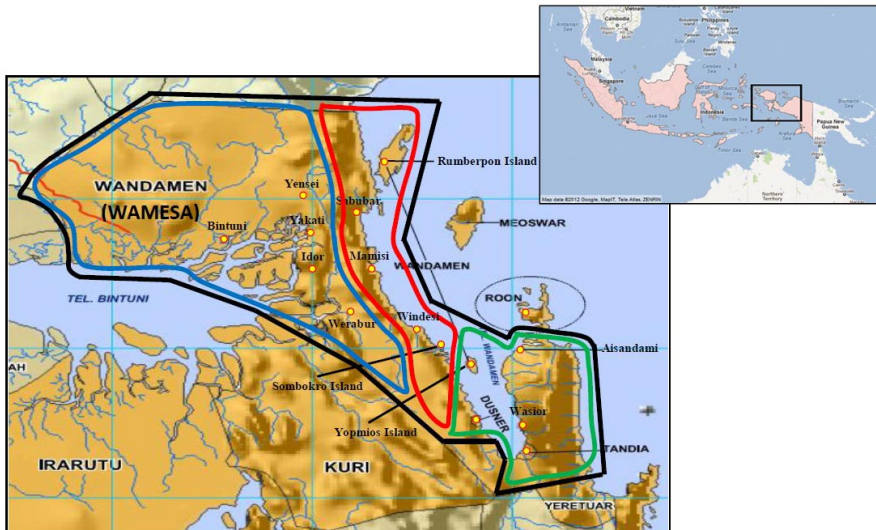


# Working in West Papua

- ▶ In summer 2011 and fall 2012 I undertook fieldwork in West Papua, Indonesia to document Windesi Wamesa.
- ▶ Community support from:
  - ▶ the Center for Endangered Languages Documentation
  - ▶ the Wamesa communities in Manokwari, Windesi, and Sombokoro.
- ▶ How to act ethically?
  - ▶ Open access & wide (local/global) dissemination.
- ▶ What can we give back?
  - ▶ Technical knowledge, social prestige, perceived spiritual gain.



# Wamesa



## History & Political Situation

- ▶ Indonesian Papua (West Papua and Papua provinces) were Dutch colonies until the 1960's, followed by annexation by Indonesia.
- ▶ The Dutch sponsored missionary work beginning in the 19th century.
- ▶ Indonesian government-sponsored transmigration programs (*transmigrasi*) have brought large numbers of people from elsewhere in Indonesia to coastal Papua.
- ▶ The Free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*) has waged a sometimes-violent independence movement since incorporation into Indonesia.
- ▶ Papuan Malay and Indonesian are overtaking local languages in many areas for everyday use.

### 3.1 The CELD



# Center for Endangered Languages Documentation

- ▶ Established at the State University of Papua (*Universitas Negeri Papua*; Unipa) in 2009.
- ▶ The CELD's mission includes:
  - ▶ “working with speech communities in Indonesian Papua to document their languages and their culture
  - ▶ training local linguists, students, and experts in state of the art documentation techniques
  - ▶ supporting teachers, government agencies, artists, and activists in developing and using materials in local languages
  - ▶ is committed to establishing sustainable structures to access linguistic and anthropological data from all over the world at the State University of Papua” ([www.celd-papua.net](http://www.celd-papua.net))





# The CELD

## What do we give back?

- ▶ Documentation of endangered languages.
  - ▶ “the death of a language and its belonging culture means the loss of a world heritage that we all dearly treasure.”
- ▶ Training of local students and community members to conduct their own documentation projects.
- ▶ Providing expertise on other areas of linguistics.
  - ▶ Donating books, leading seminars, mentoring students.
- ▶ Contributing data.
  - ▶ Making data on Papuan languages available in Papua.
  - ▶ CELD will develop regional archive system in which data of local languages can be stored and archived in the center.

## 3.2 The Wamesa Community



# The Wamesa Community

- ▶ Status: Native speakers
- ▶ **Best interests: Sharing and teaching language.**
- ▶ Speakers were enthusiastic about my project and excited to teach me their language.
- ▶ Motivations:
  - ▶ Pride.
  - ▶ Prestige.
  - ▶ Religious/spiritual.

# The Wamesa Community

## Views of Language

*“Saya punya prinsip bahasa ini: Tuhan kasih, kita membagi. Tidak boleh sembunyi yang dapat. Tidak bagus. Harus membagi kepintaran buat orang.”*

“My principle of language is this: God gave it, we share it. We can’t hide what we’ve received. That’s not good. We have to share our knowledge with people.”



-Ibu Marice Karubuy

# The Wamesa Community

## Views of Language



- ▶ Most speakers are highly religious Christians.
- ▶ They expressed the view that my project is blessed by God, and that it was God who brought me to them.
- ▶ Historically, most contact with westerners has been through missionary(/linguistic) work - positive interactions.
  - ▶ Van Balen's house is still a monument, school still used, etc.
  - ▶ Written materials in Wamesa are a bible and hymnbook.
- ▶ Language is a gift from God to be shared.

# The Wamesa Community

What do we give back?

- ▶ Prestige.
- ▶ Language materials (dictionary).
- ▶ *bawa berkat*: ‘bringing blessings’
- ▶ Practical necessities (coffee, tea, sugar, etc.)
  - ▶ *Not* a patronage relationship, unlike Holton (2009).
- ▶ One caveat: social pressure.

# The Wamesa Community

This does not obviate the need for informed consent, etc.

- ▶ No ‘secret information’ does not mean there won’t be things that get recorded which participants would rather not have made public.



## 4. In Conclusion



## Conclusion

- ▶ In conducting responsible fieldwork, it is crucial to respect the needs of the community, whatever those may be.
- ▶ Different communities may have very different ideas of what behaviors constitute respecting their best interest.
- ▶ A highly ethical course of action in one situation may be highly unethical in another.
  - ▶ Specific cultural context required for interpreting guidelines (Holton 2009; Austin 2013).

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